Self-sacrifice. From the act of violence to the passion of love

Dalferth, Ingolf U

Abstract: The paper discusses the problem of self-sacrifice as posed by Derrida in Foi et Savior and by Schiller in the Theosophie des Julius. Whereas Derrida understands self-sacrifice as an act of violence against oneself in order not to subject others to violence, Schiller rightly insists that one must distinguish between egotistical and altruistic self-sacrifice. But even this doesn't go far enough: Altruistic self-sacrifice is different from suffering death as the consequence of an entirely unselfish love. Whoever loses his life out of love does not give it up for others, whether selfishly or unselfishly. He loves the other—to death. Such a death is not a (self-)sacrifice. It results from a passion of love, not an act of violence against oneself.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-010-9248-3

Int J Philos Relig (2010) 68:77–94
DOI 10.1007/s11153-010-9248-3

Self-sacrifice

From the act of violence to the passion of love

I. U. Dalferth

Received: 18 March 2010 / Accepted: 1 June 2010 / Published online: 3 August 2010

Abstract The paper discusses the problem of self-sacrifice as posed by Derrida in *Foi et Savior* and by Schiller in the *Theosophie des Julius*. Whereas Derrida understands self-sacrifice as an act of violence against oneself in order not to subject others to violence, Schiller rightly insists that one must distinguish between egotistical and altruistic self-sacrifice. But even this doesn't go far enough: Altruistic self-sacrifice is different from suffering death as the consequence of an entirely unselfish love. Whoever loses his life out of love does not give it up for others, whether selfishly or unselfishly. He loves the other—to death. Such a death is not a (self-)sacrifice. It results from a passion of love, not an act of violence against oneself.

Keywords Sacrifice · Egoism · Altruism · Love · Passion · Violence · Derrida · Schiller · Akeda

I. U. Dalferth
School of Religion, Claremont Graduate University,
831 N. Dartmouth Avenue, Claremont, CA 91711, USA

I. U. Dalferth (✉)
Institut für Hermeneutik und Religions philosophie Theologische Fakultät, Universitat Zurich,
Kirchgasse 9, 8001 Zurich, Switzerland
e-mail: ingolf.dalferth@cgu.edu

The ambivalence of self-sacrifice

The threefold paradox of sacrifice

"Is a religion imaginable without sacrifice and without prayer?" Derrida asks in "Foi et Savior,"[1] and he answers this question in his usual paradoxical manner.[2] Since religion demands both—an absolute "respect of life" and a universal willingness to sacrifice or "sacrificial vocation"[3]— it "*both requires and excludes* sacrifice."[4] In order to retain the inviolability of life, life must be violated. And in order not to need sacrifice any longer, one must perform sacrifice. Only in "the sacrifice of the sacrifice," so Derrida, does religion come into its own. The conditions of its possibility are at the same time the conditions of its impossibility.

This paradox of sacrifice manifests itself in three concrete respects. On the one hand, sacrifice is according to Derrida, "the price to pay for not injuring or wronging the absolute other."[5] On the other hand, the use of violence "in the name of non-violence" is preposterous.[6] This is the first paradox of sacrifice: one must use *violence* in the name of non-violence in order to avoid doing violence to the non-violent other.

But there is more to it. Even if the violence of sacrifice is unavoidable in order not to violate the absolute other, it is unacceptable to subject other life to this kind of violence. "Absolute respect" therefore "enjoins first and foremost sacrifice of self," namely giving up "one's most precious interest": one's own life. Only those who sacrifice themselves are truly sacrificing. "Self-sacrifice thus sacrifices the most proper

[1] Derrida (1996, 1998), pp. 1–78, 52.

[2] Derrida's remarks on (self-)sacrifice in "Foi et Savoir"/"Faith and Knowledge" must be understood in the context of his other writings on giving, gift, and sacrifice at the time, in particular Derrida (1991, 1992a,b, 1995). Considering the so-called 'return of the gods' and in view of the ambiguity of religions, which manifest the worst and the best in humankind, Derrida asks whether there is a future for religion and if so, in what form. In order to answer this question he asks, from a hermeneutical point of view, what the question is to which religion is the answer. His answer refers to two sources of 'religion', faith and knowledge, both of which are ambiguous. Thus, faith or lived religion appears to be both a reaction to violence and based on violence. There is no religion without sacrifice, but sacrifice is deeply paradoxical. Since in sacrificing religions use violence to overcome violence, they can overcome violence only by using violence against themselves, i.e. by sacrificing themselves. This amounts to saying that the future of religion is to make religion superfluous, which can only be achieved by overcoming the violence to which religions react by sacrificing by sacrificing religion itself.

[3] Ibid. p. 50.

[4] Ibid. p. 52.

[5] This decisive premise of Derrida's argument is assumed without being argued for.

[6] This criticism is old and often repeated. Cf. Herakleitos DK 22 B 5 (Aristocritus Theosophia 681): "They vainly purify themselves by defiling themselves with blood, just as if one who had stepped into the mud were to wash his feet in mud. And they pray to these images, as if one were to talk with a man's house, knowing not what gods or heroes are." Montaigne (1962, p. 502) restates the argument in a Christian context by pointing out that a corrupted creation cannot be corrected by sacrifices which are themselves a corruption of creation. And Nietzsche (*The Antichrist*, 41) uses it as the most obvious self-contradiction of the Christian gospel: "God gave his son as a *sacrifice* for the forgiveness of sins. At once there was an end of the gospels! Sacrifice for sin, and in its most obnoxious and barbarous form: sacrifice of the *innocent* for the sins of the guilty! What appalling paganism!"

in the service of the most proper." This is the second paradox of sacrifice: one must use violence *against oneself* in order not to subject others to violence.

But yet a third point follows. Whoever sacrifices him or herself, has sacrificed once and for all. His sacrifice becomes—for him! —"the sacrifice of sacrifice." This is, if at all, the only "pure" sacrifice—and it is at the same time the exposure of its fundamental ambiguity: to demand what is strictly excluded is to demand self-annihilation in order to preserve the inviolability of the other. Whoever does not sacrifice himself does violence to the other and whoever sacrifices himself avoids doing violence to others by doing violence to himself. This is the third paradox of sacrifice: by sacrificing oneself, *the sacrifice is abolished*. Others need not fear from me any further violence, the avoidance of which would give occasion for sacrifice. Self-sacrifice ends the occasion and necessity of sacrifice: it is the end of sacrifice.

Derrida hence grounds sacrifice within self-sacrifice and proves this to be *paradoxical*. His (implicit) argument unfolds in three steps: (1) from the supposed necessity of sacrifice as a means of avoiding violence against the other to (2) the unavoidability of self-sacrifice and at the same time, the impossibility of avoiding violence against oneself to (3) the abolition or "Aufhebung" of sacrifice in self-sacrifice, which does away with the need for sacrifice by bringing about the needlessness of sacrifice in that violence against oneself excludes and ends violence against others.

The basis of this entire argument rests on situating the theme of sacrifice in the paradigm of violence: it is always a question of avoiding violence against the Other through violence either against others (sacrifice) or against oneself (self-sacrifice). That sacrifice could also be something other than acts of violence is never considered. This constitutes the fundamental weakness of the analysis: it reduces sacrifice to the act of a violent killing. However, the majority of sacrifices in religions are not blood sacrifices but food-offerings, and in blood sacrifices killing is the least important feature of the symbolical universe of the sacrifice and does not stand at its center. For example, the symbolic action of the expiatory sacrifice in ancient Israel is carried out as a *consecration* (i.e. the identification of the master of the sacrifice with the sacrificial animal, which then becomes a symbol for the master of the sacrifice) and as an *incorporation into the holy* (which "through the offering of the blood of the sacrificial animal" effects "the symbolic giving of the life of the master of the sacrifice"),[7] while the killing of the sacrificial animal plays only a subordinate role in the procurement of blood for effecting the symbolic incorporation. The religious element that matters here is not the act of killing but, on the one hand, the transfer of identity in the consecration and, on the other, the symbolic incorporation into the holy of the sacrificer through the offering of the blood of the sacrificial animal.[8]

But even within Derrida's myopic view, a key point retains a significant ambivalence: Does self-sacrifice that "sacrifices the most proper in the service of the most proper" sacrifice the most proper in the service of one's own self or in the service of the other? Or does this difference play no role because both converge in self-sacrifice towards the avoidance of violence against others? Since Derrida leaves this in the dark,

[7] Gese (1977, pp. 85–106, 98).

[8] Cf. Dalferth (1994b, pp. 237–315).

his argument exposes a weak spot at its most important juncture: it is blind against the difference between *egotistical* and *altruistic self-sacrifice*, between self-sacrifice in the service of one's own well-being and self-sacrifice in the service of the well-being of others.

Both may be described as the end of sacrifice, but only the latter and not the former gives occasion for speaking of an *act of love.* However, to understand the phenomenon under consideration as an act of love, "explodes" (in Blumenberg's sense[9]) the reductive paradigm of violence and opens up a new and different perspective. To put it succinctly, and this is the thesis for which I shall argue: If the altruistic loss of one's own life for the sake of the other is an avoidable act of violence against oneself—that is, an act of violence that one commits against oneself without having necessarily had to commit it—then it is a self-sacrifice, but not an act of love. Is it, on the other hand, an act of love, then one's own avoidable death—that is, the death that one could have avoided—is no act of violence against oneself and as such no self-sacrifice but the result of a passion of unselfish love that will allow nothing, not even one's own impending death, to stop it to live its love of others indeed for the sake of others rather than for one's own sake. The decisive difference is not between *sacrifice and self-sacrifice*, but between *egotistic and altruistic self-sacrifice*, on the one hand, and between *an act of violence and an act of love* on the other. For only the difference between egotistic and altruistic self-sacrifice opens the perspective for understanding the avoidable loss of one's own life for the sake of others not in the paradigm of violence, but in the paradigm of love; however, to understand it as an act of love it is to understand it not as an act of violence and hence not even as altruistic self-sacrifice but in a different category altogether. For love exists only where love is lived and practiced, and the practice of love overcomes both sacrifice and self-sacrifice by reacting to violence not by violence but by non-violent love even at the cost of loosing one's life. To show this, I shall first argue for the need to distinguish between egotistic and altruistic self-sacrifice, and then for understanding the avoidable loss of one's own life for the sake of others not as an act of violence against oneself but as an act of love for the other.

Egotistical and altruistic self-sacrifice

One of the most compelling expositions of the difference between egotistic and altruistic self-sacrifice can be found in Schiller's *Theosophie des Julius* in which precisely this difference is identified as the crucial point in the problematic of sacrifice.[10] Schiller's argument does not, however, begin with the sacrifice but with the reality of love. As Julius, Schiller's alter ego, impresses upon his friend Raphael: "I admit it

[9] Cf. H. Blumenberg's term "Sprengmetaphorik" in Blumenberg (1960, pp. 7–142): "What we would call 'explosive metaphorics'… draws concretization into a *process*, in which it it at first able to follow along (e.g., conceiving a circle's radius doubled and ever further increased), but finally reaches a point (e.g., conceiving the greatest possible, that is, infinite, radius of a circle) where it has to give up—and this is understood as 'giving itself up' as well." (132, translation)

[10] Fr. Schiller (1975, pp.344–358).

frankly; I believe in the reality of a non-selfish love."[11] "But love has brought forth effects which seem to contradict its nature. It is conceivable that I increase my own happiness through a sacrifice, which I offer for the happiness of others—but is that also the case when this sacrifice is my own life?… How is it possible that we could regard our own death as a means to increase the sum of our pleasure? How can the termination of my existence agree with the enrichment of my being?"[12] What appears conceivable with sacrifice becomes paradoxical with self-sacrifice: the one for whom it could and should bring an improvement of life no longer lives.

A possible answer may be found in the reference to immortality: "The assumption of an immortality lifts this contradiction."[13] But Julius sees correctly that love is thereby also lifted. "Consideration for a rewarding future excludes love."[14] "It is indeed ennobling to the human soul to sacrifice the present advantages for the eternal—it is the noblest degree of egoism—but egoism and love separate humankind into two highly dissimilar races, whose boundaries never flow into one another. Egoism erects its center in itself; love plants it outside of itself in the axis of the eternal whole. Love aims at unity, egoism at solitude. Love is the co-governing citizen of a blossoming free state, egoism a despot in a ravaged creation. Egoism sows for gratitude, love for ingratitude. Love gives away, egoism lends out—no matter before the throne of the judging truth whether this is done for the enjoyment of the next-following moment, or with the prospect of a martyr's crown—no matter, whether the interest is achieved in this life or in the other!"[15]

Hence an egotism nurtured by the hope for immortality is also the opposite of love. The question raised must therefore be answered another way: "Imagine a truth, my Raphael, that does all humankind good for distant centuries to come—add to this that this truth condemns the one who professes it to death, that this truth can only be proven, can only be believed if the one who professes it dies."[16] Then imagine a man who wants to realize this very truth: "does this man need the directive of a future life?"[17] The answer, which Julius suggests, is clearly *no*. Only he who acts in this way does not act egotistically when he sacrifices himself.

Schiller thus distinguishes between an *egotistical self-sacrifice*, which is carried out in hope of an eternal remuneration[18] and an *altruistic self-sacrifice*, which is carried out for the sake of others—of all others and therefore for the sake of the whole of humankind—and which alone deserves to be called a *sacrifice of love*. Only the latter is a "virtue … which can do without a belief in immortality, which effects the sacrifice

[11] Ibid. p. 351.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid. pp. 351–352.

[16] Ibid. 352.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Cf. the explanation of early Christian martyrdom in terms of rational choice theory in Starke (1996); Janowski (2007), 9ff.

in question even at the risk of annihilation."[19] Only someone who sacrifices him or herself solely for the sake others—all others!—acts truly out of unselfish love.

Altruistic self-sacrifice in Schiller's sense of unselfish love therefore distinguishes itself in two ways. On the one hand, it is not motivated by an attitude of egotistical value maximization beyond the boundary of death: it is fundamentally altruistic, not egotistic. On the other hand, it is not restricted, particular or abstract, but unrestricted, universal and concrete. It is based neither in family relations, which privilege genetic closeness i.e. blood or kinship ties and thus do not include all[20]; nor is it based in friendship bonds, which do not exist without local proximity or personal acquaintance and which are therefore also restricted[21]; nor is it based in an abstract moral maxim that one must under certain circumstances sacrifice oneself for all those who fall under a specific rule. Unconditional, unselfish and thus universally inclusive is but a concrete form of neighbor love, which is not a version of the rule of sagacity, to do unto others what one expects from others or (in its negative form) not to do unto others as you would not do unto yourself. In this case one would treat others as a neighbor because one expects the same from them. Concrete neighbor love is precisely not attached to that kind of expectation but sees and treats the other also as a neighbor when those expectations are unrealistic or thwarted. It is not founded in the reciprocity of the like for like but in the experience of having become God's freely chosen neighbor without having a right or entitlement to it; and since God also relates to all others as his freely chosen neighbors, one can rely on God in every situation, for people do not choose God but God chooses people. Without this a question of choice on their part could not even arise. Everyone therefore has a right to be seen and treated as God's neighbor just as much as oneself. Seen in this light, neighbor love becomes a reorientation of a human life by the insight into the prior love of God. It does not result from a moral self-determination of one's own conduct towards others, but rather manifests the fact that one has become the neighbor of the one who has made all other people to his neighbors as well so that everyone under all circumstances and without exception is to be seen and to be treated as God's neighbor.

However, if altruistic self-sacrifice is understood from this perspective, then one cannot stop with Schiller either. If neighbor love leads to death, then this is not a substitutional self-sacrifice by which someone goes to his or her death in the place of another in order to save him or her or avoid this other person's death; on the contrary,

[19] Ibid. p. 351.

[20] In this sense the pelican which provides her own blood to her young when no other food is available became a symbol of self-sacrificing love in medieval Europe.

[21] Jonas (1979, p. 5) criticizes traditional moral maxims such as principle of Christian neighbor love "Love thy neighbor as thyself" or the Golden Rule "Do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you" because "in all these maxims the agent and the 'other' of his action are sharers of a common present…. The ethical universe is composed of contemporaries, and its horizon to the future is confined by the foreseeable span of their lives." (5) This he believes to be utterly insufficient in view of the ecological crisis that faces humanity today. In order to cope with today's challenges we need to change from neighbor love to the love of the most distant ones as expressed in the ecological imperative: "'Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life'; or expressed negatively: 'Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life'" (11). But it is a mistake to think neighbor love to be restricted to contemporaries and contrast it to the love of distant ones or of enemies. Rightly understood it includes those and is not opposed to them.

it is a question of stepping in for another at the cost of one's own self-preservation, of being present to the other in her needs even at the cost of one's own life. Furthermore, such a death is not a sacrifice due to pity or compassion, in which one gives up one's own life in solidarity with the suffering of another, but rather an expression of *unfailing neighbor love that is lived unto death.* Something is done *for* others (and not *in place of* others or *in solidarity with* others) which leads to the loss of one's own life; and it is not only done for them, but would be done for all others in a similar situation in a similar fashion because not doing so would be incompatible with how one is supposed to conduct oneself towards those who are God's freely chosen neighbors. In such a case it is a question of living and dying *for the sake of others* and *for others*. One does not intentionally seek out one's own death even if it leads to it but accepts even death because anything else would stand in a fundamental contradiction to the orientation of one's own life in terms of love and hence amount to an existential self-contradiction: whoever dies out of neighbor love does not kill oneself but rather loves the one whom God loves, even if it results in losing one's life.

To sum up; for Derrida, the paradox in the basic structure of sacrifice is most obvious in the phenomenon of self-sacrifice. According to Schiller, this needs to be differentiated: as an act of violence against oneself (egotistical self-sacrifice) or as an act of love (altruistic self-sacrifice). To distinguish between these two kinds of sacrifice is correct and important but does not go far enough. As soon as one understands altruistic self-sacrifice as an act of love, then an idea is introduced that breaks the paradigm of sacrifice apart and involves a shift to a different frame of thought for understanding the phenomenon in question: a death resulting from unconditional, unselfish love does not have to be self-sacrifice; it can also be the consequence of a passion of unremitting love.

Altruistic self-sacrifice and unselfish love

Self-sacrifice is a certain kind of sacrifice—namely its paradoxical limit case: one doesn't give up another but *one's own life*. This renunciation of life can result from egotistical or altruistic motives. However, and this is what Schiller makes clear, a self-giving of one's life is not a means of securing one's self-preservation across the boundary of death. Moreover, whoever gives one's own life for the profit of others uses it as a means to an end and therefore remains caught in the paradigm of egotistical self-sacrifice by using one's own life as a means to reach an extrinsic goal. By surrendering one's own life as a means to an end, one chooses death, but in doing so one stays master of one's own self insofar as one chooses for *oneself* one's own death and sees its meaning precisely in this self-made decision. Surrendering one's life for the sake of others can thus be a subtle expression of an egotistical attitude towards life, which subjects even one's own suffering and death to one's own power of action and one's own endowment of something with meaning: one gives oneself death in order to be the one who gives one's own death an altruistic meaning. Even in death one is thus still the master of one's own life. The sacrifice of one's own life becomes a vehicle to reach an extrinsic end.

Death as a result of *unconditional, unselfish love* is something else. In this case one gives up neither another nor one's own life, but *nothing at all*: one *suffers* death (and does not *give oneself* death) in loving advocacy for others. One's own death is

in this sense not a gift to anyone, not an act of violence against oneself and therefore not a sacrifice in the sense outlined: one does not give up on life but lives it in such a way that it exhausts itself in the love of others. One loves so unconditionally and so unrestrictedly that even one's own self-preservation does not present itself as an obstacle or limit to this love. It is thus not self-sacrifice and as such sacrifice itself, but neighbor love and as such love itself, which constitutes the horizon in which the sense of one's own death is disclosed.

Hence death as a result of neighbor love is distinct from altruistic self-sacrifice in that it is not an act of violence against oneself but *a suffering of the consequences of an entirely unselfish love*. Such a death is no sacrifice in that one gives up something or even one's own life in order to reach an external goal or avoid a consequence. Acts of unselfish love are carried out without a 'because' or a 'why.' They orient themselves entirely along others and use one's own life not even as a means. Their point is to do something completely out of love for others even if one loses one's life in the process. When Maximilian Kolbe voluntarily took the place of Franciszek Gajowniczek in Auschwitz-Birkenau, it would be a mistake to think that he sacrificed himself by using his life as a means to save others; rather, he acted out of neighbor love in such a way that he accepted death, because practicing unconditional love was a higher goal for him than saving his own life. His death was not the end or means of his love but its consequence. In practicing love he was not concerned about his own death but about the life of the other; and since an action is defined by the intention or motive that governs it, what he did was not an act of self-sacrifice but of unrestricted love.

In cases such as these, one's own death is neither the end nor a means of what one does, but is rather taken as an unavoidable collateral damage, so to speak, in abiding under all circumstances by the love of one's neighbor. It would not be an unrestricted, unselfish love if one were dissuaded by one's own impending death. Whoever loses her life in acting for the other does not commit an act of violence against herself, but suffers death as a result of unconditional neighbor love.

This is why such acts are not sacrifices. Where life is lost out of love, sacrifice ends. No one is giving anything to anybody, whether the life of others or one's own life, in order to reach a goal. If others reach or receive anything by it, then it is not in any intentional sense *given* to them by the one who lost his (or her) life, even if they do not—or could not—reach that goal without this person's death. Understood in this sense, 'sacrifices of love' are not sacrifices but acts of love. As acts of love they are directed towards the other, but they do not intend the death of the one who loves, in particular not as a means to an end. Rather, if the loving one suffers death, then because he (or she) cannot be dissuaded from living one's life for the love of others. The death of the one who loves is not the end or a means of his or her action but a consequence of living a life that is exclusively and totally oriented and informed by the well-being of the other.

The passion of love

For precisely this reason, one must hold against Derrida, a religion can *neither expect nor exclude the willingness to die for love*. Loss of life out of unselfish love also reaches

beyond Schiller's altruistic self-sacrifice. It is not an act of violence, neither against oneself nor against others. It is not an act of any kind that the one who dies would carry out in order to end his (or her) life; it is, rather, the suffered loss of life—and not the sought or intended loss—be it in the conscious risk of one's life for others, be it with factual consequences for others that may not even have been intended. Loss of life out of love does not constitute a gift for others in that it results from an intentional activity. Whoever loses his life out of love does not give it up for others, whether selfishly or unselfishly. He loves the other—to death. But the motive and goal of his love is life, not death, and that his love leads to death is not the result of an act of violence against himself but a consequence of the actual situation in which he practices his love, which makes his love suffer and turns it into passion.

The decisive difference between sacrifice and self-sacrifice is therefore not that sacrifice relinquishes another's life while self-sacrifice relinquishes one's own: in the case of the former, the identity of the master of the sacrifice is symbolically transferred to the sacrificial animal, which suffers death in place of the sacrificer in order to retain his life; by contrast, self-sacrifice involves giving up one's own life in order to retain the lives of others. The crucial point is rather that one's own death becomes an expression and execution of unselfish love only when it is no longer the limit case of sacrifice in which not someone else's life but one's own life is sacrificed, but where nothing, not even one's own suffering or impending death keeps someone from pursuing relentlessly what is good for others. When acts of love lead to one's own suffering or death, then one has not actively aspired to this but rather suffers it as a passion of love, which under no circumstances and on no condition gives up on its commitment to others.

It is not self-evident that such an unselfish love exists—a love that does not let itself be kept from living for the sake of others, be it for the price of one's own suffering and death. The reality of such a love, in human life as much as with respect to God, had to be discovered in religions through a long and complicated process. Biblical tradition documents this impressively, especially where it shows, within the very paradigm of sacrifice, the change from understanding something as an act of violence to understanding it as an act of love. It thereby makes the discovery that sacrifice has no future, but an end: the crucial insight about sacrifice is not that it is religiously necessary, even if impossible to realize, but that it is possible, but no longer necessary. One can sacrifice, even oneself, but one does not need to because what one is trying to accomplish cannot be reached through sacrifice and has long since been reached through the reality of unselfish love.

Important strands in the Biblical tradition substantiate this transition from the paradigm of sacrifice to the paradigm of a completely different form of life and thought, most impressively the stories of Abraham's trial and Jesus' crucifixion. The former demonstrates that God's promises are infallibly trustworthy; the latter, that God's power does not reside in violence but in love.[22] Taken together they prove through

[22] This changes the meaning and point of the notion of divine power from a first order predicate or attribute of *God* to a second order predicate or attribute of the *nature* of God, i.e. of divine love: The meaning of God's power is misconstrued if understood as mere divine omnipotence rather than as the *omnipotence of divine love*.

exemplary stories of real-life experiments that God is love—a love that does not want sacrifice but a life lived in unconditional commitment to others.

Abraham's experiment with God: the discovery of God's trustworthiness

The story of Abraham's trial in Gen 22 is found in the cycle of Abraham narratives that stretch from Gen 11:27 through Gen 22 to the account of Abraham's death in Gen 25.[23] This cycle has its central theological motive in God's twofold promise of the land and of blessing Abraham's name and making him the father of a great nation (Gen. 12: 1–3). The fact that these promises are emphasized in this way indicates how seriously they had been put into question in Israel's experience of exile since 587/586, the most probable time of the origin of this cycle.

Abraham's silence: the ambivalence of God

If we read Gen 22 not in isolation but as part of the cycle of Abraham narratives as it has been handed down, then it does not deal with a drama between Abraham and Isaac, but between *Israel*, for whom Abraham functions as the progenitor, and *God*.[24] The dynamic of the narrative unfolds in the framework of the programmatic promise and blessing given to Abraham at the beginning of the cycle: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 12: 1–3); this is then explicitly geared at Isaac at the beginning of the *Aqeda*-narrative in Gen 21: 12: not through Ismael but "through Isaac shall your descendants be named," as God assures Abraham.

Against the backdrop of this promise the critical conflict in the narrative of Gen 22 is therefore not between Abraham and Isaac but between a *God* who promises Abraham great things in and through Isaac, and *the same* God, who instructs Abraham to perform

[23] Cf. for a more extensive account of the following Dalferth (2008, pp. 456–500).

[24] It is remarkable what the story does *not* narrate: Abraham does not speak to God, Isaac does not protest, Sarah does not occur at all, Ishmael is not mentioned, Abraham shows no ambiguous feelings towards Isaac, and Isaac does not comment on anything that goes on. He remains a very shadowy figure in the narrative and disappears completely from the scene after the ram has been sacrificed and Abraham returns to Beersheba. All this has again and again given rise to multiple interpretations and fanciful elaborations. Abraham's silence was extensively explained, Sarah's death was depicted as being caused by the shock of hearing about the intended killing of Isaac, Isaac's role in the story was extensively enlarged and changed by presenting him not as a silent sufferer but as a victim who explicitly pleads for his binding and besieges his father to kill him in order to fulfill God's will etc. Many of these redactions, updates, and adjustments go back to pre-Christian times and show how unfixed and versatile the textual history of this narrative was for a long time. But they have little or no basis in the biblical version of the story: They fill in what readers experienced as missing because it is not told in the biblical narrative. But if one sticks to the actual narrative in Gen 22, then one may doubt whether it really is a story about Abraham *and* Isaac rather than about *Abraham* in which also Isaac occurs—just as the Swiss legend of Wilhelm Tell in which Tell is ordered to shoot an apple off his son's head with his crossbow is not a story about Tell's son, or about the relationship between father and son, but about the Swiss struggle for independence from the Habsburg empire. The figurative inventory of the story and the imaginatively possible relations between the characters in the narrative are not a sufficient key to a proper understanding of the story. This will only be possible by sticking to the actual narrative and by interpreting its point in the context of the dynamics of the actual story as told.

a deed directed at Isaac whose realization would make this promise completely impossible. The tension between God's promise and its impossibility through God himself by his order to kill determines the narrative: does God give Israel with one hand while taking it back with the other? Can one rely on a God who retracts everything promised any time and without reason? Can one still count on God's fidelity—can one count on God at all?

Both the promise and the directive making this promise impossible are attributed *to the same God* so that there is no way out by grounding the promise in God and the questioning of this promise in anyone else but God, as it has been tried by versions of the *Aqeda* story in the wake of the prologue of Job.[25] Rather, Abraham is placed into a dilemma, in which there is virtually nothing else for him to say since God seems to have fallen into a contradiction. To speak with others about God will not lead him any farther, and to speak to God is impossible because God has become so contradictory that he can no longer be addressed in a determinative way ("my God").

Abraham's action: the trial of God

Where nothing more can be said, life will decide. This conflict cannot be decided by argument because God has become incomprehensible and inaccessible as a dialogue partner; the conflict can only be carried out in that Abraham takes the one side of God's paradoxical and self-contradictory will at his word and acts upon it to the point where the question of God takes care of itself or where God himself—so the solution of the tale—repeals the ambivalence in his Abraham/Israel relationship and owns up to his promises. In brief, it is not Abraham who is put to the test by God, but rather Abraham, who no longer speaks but acts, puts God to the test. Abraham virtually compels God either to take leave from his people as God or to prove himself as God and to stand by his promises to his people. He dares to challenge God and he wins—not only clarity (this he would have won even in the case of a negative outcome of the trial) but certainty that God stands by his promises.

Why is this testing of God—this carrying out of the conflict in Israel's relationship to God and understanding of God—theologically depicted through the very story of Abraham's offering of his beloved son? Because it lends itself excellently to demonstrating the conflict in Abraham's/Israel's relationship to and trust in God. The decisive point of the story is not that Abraham should kill *his beloved son* but that his beloved son is *the only reliable pledge of God's promise*. The existentially extreme situation in which Israel in exile finds itself vis-a-vis God is made apparent here in that Abraham is prepared, upon God's order, to destroy the very pledge of God's promise: either this is the end of all dealings of Israel with God or God must surrender his ambivalence with respect to Israel.

It is precisely for the depiction of this trial of God that the ancient cult legend regarding the replacement of child sacrifice by animal sacrifice is taken up and told anew with the protagonists God, Abraham and Isaac. The story does not serve to make

[25] Cf. the versions of the story that were found in Qumran in which prince Mastemah and his evil angels machinate against Abraham before God (4Q225 2 i and ii; 4QPs-Jub[a] 2 i 7-14, 2 ii 1-14).

claims about the arbitrary will of God, or about the violence intrinsic even to the most moral religion, or about the religious monstrosity of a blind faith in God who demands obedience all the way to the moral degradation of the believer. It is not about any of this, but only about disambiguating a God who in his unpredictable turning to and turning away is experienced as a pure paradox and hence cannot serve as giving direction to one's life.[26] One cannot trust such a God. He becomes superfluous as a point of reference or orientation.

The narrative clarification in Gen 22 results in a more precise understanding of God and of Israel's relationship to God. God is not to be found invariably in everything, but only in certain experiences, and only certain ways of life and action correspond to God's will while others do not. This is the basic insight both of Jewish ethics as culminating in the Torah and of Christian ethics as concentrated in the commandment of love: one can now say with certainty *that nothing can be attributed to God or God's will that contradicts God's promises or that would bring human beings in contradiction to God's will as expressed in his promises.*

This is not self-evident, for why should a promise given freely not also be taken back freely? Exactly this possibility is excluded in the *Aqeda*-story, in that its realization is depicted as resulting in a self-contradiction and self-repeal of God and is thereby declared a factual impossibility. God's promises are certain, even if one cannot fathom from one's own experiences how one stands with God. God is trustworthy, even if the evidence of one's life is ambiguous—this is how one could summarize the practical point of this story. If God can no longer be distinguished from his promises nor be thought of as an arbitrary free will completely independent of them, then he can also no longer be utilized for everything indiscriminately but only for certain things and in specific respects.

Seen in this way, Gen 22 recounts by way of an old legend (the replacement of child sacrifice with animal sacrifice) a new and extremely consequential story for the religious life and thought of Israel: the story of ascertaining the trustworthiness of God's promises through Abraham's trial of God. By taking God, whom Israel no longer understands, at his word and by acting out what cannot be argued out, Abraham creates a decisive situation in which God proves himself to be either entirely superfluous or the one who cannot revoke his promises without self-contradiction that amounts to self-annihilation. There is nothing impossible about revoking a promise as such, and the evidence of Israel's experience seemed to show that this had indeed happened in the case of God. Contrary to this Gen 22 affirms that God strictly excludes any revocation of his promises as impossible for himself so that human experience cannot serve as a reliable judge in matters of faith: *either there is no God, or God's promises cannot be revoked even by God himself. Tertium non datur* —so the story emphasizes.

With the conclusion of Abraham's God-experiment, the promise is reliably inscribed into the very idea of God, i.e., there is no longer any way to distinguish

[26] This is clearly expressed in the twin parables of BerR 56,11 which interpret Gen 22:15–16. It is Abraham whose strength of faith saves God from getting involved in a deadly self-contradiction by undoing himself his own promise. And in the second parable it is again Abraham who makes God swear never to do something like this again. By divine oath God is now tied to his promise and hence forthwith a God who can be trusted. Cf. Thoma and Lauer (1991, pp. 308–310).

God meaningfully from what he has promised Israel. God can no longer be played off against his promises. Whoever says "God," speaks of the one who stands by his promises.

The life-experiment of Jesus: the discovery of God's love

The same can be said in the Christian case. Christian faith in God is intrinsically related to the life, teaching, suffering, and death of Jesus. However, that God's will for humankind is manifested in Jesus is not readily apparent. According to the gospels, Jesus directly connected the beginning of God's benevolent kingdom with his own person (Mt 11:5f) in his teachings and acts of healing, and during his brief active life he was able to convince a few disciples of this. But at the end his life he was not even sure of this connection himself. According to the oldest gospels Mark and Matthew, Jesus died on the cross with a cry—a cry of God-forsakenness: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk, 15:34; Mt 27:47) The citation from Ps 22 is not a disguised sign of hope in God, but rather an expression of despair. It is a lamentation and an accusation of someone who finds himself unjustly and against all fairness abandoned by God, whom God has not stood by or assisted in his need, who dies deserted by God and the world—without the trust in God that Luke has him articulate (Lk 23:46) and without the confidence that John gives him for having fulfilled God's duty (John 19:30).

God's silence: Jesus' unsuccessful test of God

According to the gospel of Mark, God himself has become the reason for Jesus' despair on the cross. There is no question that God is still the one to whom Jesus addresses his lament. He is not plagued by modernity's intellectual doubt about God's existence, but by the practical despair about the seclusion and withdrawal of God who fails to act in the hour of his greatest need. God, who had been the most intimate center of his life ("my father"), offers him neither help nor direction.

This contradicts everything the New Testament tells us about Jesus' gospel message of the imminent coming of God's kingdom that he promulgated through his teachings, life, parabolic actions and narratives.[27] God's time of salvation is at hand and ends the suffering of all those who change their lives and believe in the gospel (Mk 1:15). For all we know Jesus lived in the conviction that through his acting and teaching he was actually enacting God's will. This is the very reason why God's silence on the cross is for Jesus a breaking of his word, unjust and merciless towards the very one who has placed all of his hope in God's compassion and righteousness; a willful default of God to render assistance to one of his creatures; the failure of a father to be true to his son; a complete contradiction to everything he had preached and acted out as God's good will for humankind in the parables of the prodigal son, of the good Samaritan, in the healing of the sick, and in the symbolic actions of forgiving of sins. It seems that on

[27] Stanton (2004, Chap. 1) grounds even the term 'gospel' by reference to Jes 61, Lk 4 and the Q-passage Lk 7:19–13 resp. Mt 11:2–6 in Jesus' own teaching.

the cross, the God proclaimed by Jesus has become untrue to himself, and it is in this despair, according to the oldest testimony of the gospels, that Jesus died.

The story of Abraham in Gen 22 and the story of Jesus in Mark's gospel thus both present a God-experiment by their respective protagonists that concerns God's trustworthiness and the reliability of his promises. But both do so with a strikingly different narrative trajectory and outcome. In the *Aqeda*-story Abraham tests God when he no longer knows, as a result of God's contradictory promises and directions, what his relationship to God is. In the end, God has proven himself to be inseparable from his promises because he has committed himself to them: God is the God of promises, and because God can and will not be otherwise, his promises for Israel are reliable even where this isn't recognizable in a real-life circumstance. Jesus, on the other hand, dedicated his entire "career" to God's promise and counted on his faithfulness and support all the way to the cross, but in the end he was disappointed by God and died in despair.

On a narrative level the first story ends positively, the second negatively. The narrative logic of the *Aqeda*-story focuses on the repeal of God's ambivalence, and does so for Abraham himself, who through his action brings God into a situation in which he must decide for or against himself and is thus forced to commit himself to what he wants to be as God for Israel: the question about God's godhead is decided in the narrative of the story for Abraham himself and is also presented as such. In Mark's gospel, however, the ambivalence is driven to the extreme of presenting Jesus on the cross as dying convinced of having been deserted by God and this is not corrected or put straight for Jesus himself within the narrative. The narrative logic of the gospel lets Jesus end on the cross in contradistinction to everything that is, according to Mark 1:15, contained in the gospel and unfolded in the gospel narrative of Jesus' life and activity. The one story results hence in a clarified idea of God, the other leads to the point where the meaning of term "God" has become completely unclear. While the narrative trajectory in the Abraham story leads from uncertainty to certainty about God, the narrative trajectory of the gospel narrative leads from the certainty about God to the loss of God.

The third view: autobiographical and biographical perspective

But this is only the case if one reads these stories in isolation and ignores their wider contexts. In the story of Abraham, everything that needs to be said is said *in* the story. In Mark's story of Jesus, on the other hand, a dramatic conflict is built up between Jesus' understanding of God as proclaimed in the gospel and the loss of God by the proclaimer of that gospel as he dies on the cross. This conflict is not resolved in the gospel narrative of his life, but—the account of the empty grave (Mk 16:1–8) and the secondary ending of Mark (Mk 16:9–20) substantiate this—finds resolution only in the life of those to whom this story is told and who experience the crucified as the resurrected one. The darkness into which the understanding of God falls on the cross is lifted and repealed not in the life story of Jesus, and therefore for Jesus himself, but in the life story of those who believe in him as Christ, and therefore for others. The other gospels corroborate this too in that they do not conclude the story of Jesus' life

experiment with the cross but continue it with their accounts of the Easter discovery of his resurrection, the appearances of the resurrected one, and his ascension to God in heaven. God's saving activity that is seen in this story and confessed by recounting it is not presented as occurring in the life, suffering, and death of Jesus but rather in the lives of those who believe in him as Christ. The theological point of the gospel story of Jesus does not lie in his story itself but in the life of those who recognize him as Christ, and only by including this point of view of others in the story of Jesus himself can his story be properly represented.

If we follow the logic of Mark's gospel, then from the autobiographical perspective of *Jesus himself* his life story with God ends with his cry of God's abandonment. It is only with the biographical perspective of others on the Jesus' story that it becomes apparent that this is not the whole story or the last word about God and God's godhead. For them, the ambivalence of God on the cross is undone and overcome by using Jesus' own understanding of God as loving father as a key to making sense of his whole story, including his death on the cross. To do so, they had to inscribe the inscrutable *aporia* between Jesus' promulgation of God and the end of his life as a dialectic into the very idea of God, thereby creating a *Christian* understanding of God that in significant ways goes beyond Jesus' own understanding.

God as love: from Jesus' understanding to a Christian understanding of God

As a result, certain traits of Jesus' idea of God are intensified and deepened while new ones are added. Thus, it is *God alone* who lifts the ambivalence, which made Jesus despair on the cross, by moving people through the workings of *the spirit* to believe in Jesus as Christ, i.e. as the ultimate disclosure of God's salvific will for all humankind. For precisely this reason the reference to Jesus' story culminating on the cross, told as his life experiment with God, is inscribed as an indelible character into the Christian understanding of God. This happens discursively in the narrative unfolding of the metaphors of Jesus' resurrection, his ascension to heaven and his seat on God's right side, all of which establish in their own way that God is no longer to be understood apart from the life story of Jesus and the life story of those who believe and profess that Jesus is the Christ.

In the trajectory of Mark's gospel, the dramatic, theological point of the life experiment of Jesus is not to be found in his own story but in the life story of those who proclaim him to be Christ: They state the truth about his life (in a biographical perspective) that is inaccessible to Jesus himself from within his life (in an autobiographical perspective); and this truth is the creative presence of God's love even where it isn't perceived and experienced by the ones to whom God is present but only by others. The life story of Jesus is thus internally related to the life story of Christians, and vice versa (and there is nobody who could not in principle become a Christian): Just as the truth of their lives cannot be expressed without reference to Jesus, so the truth of his life cannot be stated without referring to their lives; and in each case the reference is mediated through 'the third' that is common to both of them: the presence of God's creative love in their lives.

The internal connection between the life story of Jesus and the life stories of Christians thus becomes manifest in the continuous and ongoing determination of the idea of God in a process which Christians attribute not to their own power of interpretation but to the eye-opening working of the spirit of God. It runs, with many ups and downs, from the Jewish through the Jesusian to the Christian understanding of God.[28] Thus what became the Christian idea of God originated with the Jewish tradition, became intensified in Jesus, ran into a decisive crisis at the cross, was continuously deepened and revised in the Christian interpretation of this crises in the light of Jesus' own understanding of God as loving father, became critically marked off against the mythological, natural and political theologies of the ancient world in a way that resulted in the Trinitarian account of God, and has since been a continual challenge to reconfigure God not as a past reality but as a present and creative actuality.

The creative power of love

The condensation of this complex process in the Christian determination of God as love creates the idea of a creative, unlimited, and unselfish love that establishes in Israel's understanding of God and in Jesus' understanding of God as father the very precondition for recognizing a love to be at work in Jesus' life and death that creates new life out of suffering and death. It is not God who sacrifices Jesus on the cross, nor does Jesus sacrifice himself, but out of love for those to whom he proclaims the advent of God's benevolent reign he goes all the way to his death on the cross.

Precisely this life of unconditional love that leads to Jesus' death on the cross proves for Christians to be an irreversible sign that here God discloses himself as unselfish, unconditional love. This is why they confess Jesus as God's love incarnate, and God's love as his creative presence that creates good out of evil and new possibilities for his creatures even in death. Even where they themselves cannot realize this any more,

[28] All of them are given only in a plural form. This is also true of Jesus' understanding of God, which for us is accessible only through the different versions of the different gospels. But even so it is clear that Jesus proclaimed not a new God but rather concentrated, emphasized and intensified the understanding of God in the prophetic and theological traditions of Israel in the light of his own experience, faith, and hope. The outcome was Jesus' distinctive understanding of God as benevolent heavenly father whose reign of peace is imminent. This understanding of God, which Jesus lived and proclaimed, ran into a decisive crisis at the cross which could have been the end of Jesus' intensification of the theological traditions of Israel. But in fact the reverse took place in that Jesus' understanding of God, which appeared to have come to an end at the cross, became the hermeneutical key and theological frame for understanding this very end. By understanding the cross of Jesus in the light of Jesus' own teaching about God as God's resurrection of the crucified one, and by understanding this understanding of the cross not as their own interpretation but as the result of the eye-opening work of God's spirit, the followers of Jesus learned to cope with the crises of Jesus' understanding of God at the cross by understanding this crisis precisely in terms of Jesus' understanding of God, thereby deepening it into the Christian understanding of God. Thus, just as Jesus intensified Israel's understanding of God by interpreting his own life in and through it, and vice versa, so the Christians intensified Jesus' understanding of God by interpreting Jesus' death on the cross as well as their own experiences of the presence of his spirit in terms of Jesus' understanding of God. They confessed the resurrection of the crucified one by the very God whom Jesus had proclaimed; they elaborated this confession in the light of their own experiences of the spirit and in critical dialogue with the theologies and philosophies of their time; and they thus intensified and deepened Jesus' understanding of God into the Christian doctrine of the trinity. Cf. Dalferth (1994a; 1998, 379–409).

others will. This gives a counterfactual ring to the Christian confession of God's creative love. But precisely this sets free the creative dynamics of Christian life. For on the one hand, God's love experiences and suffers the suffering and dying of his creatures as his own passion, as the cross discloses. On the other, this divine passion transforms the suffering of others into the determination of God's own life to create new life out of this suffering, as is shown in the resurrection.

And as with Jesus, so with all others. Evil suffered is thereby not abolished or revoked, but overcome in such a way that something new and good comes out of it. This is the creative power of love. Sacrifice terminates violence through other violence, and self-sacrifice violence against others through violence against oneself; but this merely replaces one evil by another. The passion of divine love, on the other hand, does not overcome evil with evil but with good, by determining itself through its love for others to create new life out of suffering and death, thus giving the dead a future and the hopeless hope. Neither sacrifice nor self-sacrifice can do that. For the schism between old and new, between death and life cannot be bridged through violence, nor can it be bridged through violence against violence or sacrifice against sacrifice, but only through love that for no reason whatsoever creates inexhaustibly new life out of evil, destruction, and death.

"Is a religion imaginable without sacrifice …?" asked Derrida. My answer is: Indeed, and it better should if religions are not to be taken merely as manifestations of human misery and despair but rather as rich and creative expressions of human fulfillment and hope for a human life at its best.

References

Blumenberg, H. (1960). Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie. *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte, 6*, 7–142.

Dalferth, I. U. (1994a). *Der auferweckte Gekreuzigte: Zur Grammatik der Christologie*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Dalferth, I. U. (1994b). Sühnopfer: Die Heilsbedeutung des Todes Jesu. In *Der auferweckte Gekreuzigte. Zur Grammatik der Christologie* (pp. 237–315). Tübingen.

Dalferth, I. U. (1998). Volles Grab, leerer Glaube? In *ZThK 95*, pp. 379–409.

Dalferth, I. U. (2008). *Malum Theologische Hermeneutik des Bösen*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Derrida, J. (1991). *Donner le Temps, 1: Fausse Monnai*. Paris: Galilée.

Derrida, J. (1992a). *Given time: Counterfeit money*. Chicago/London: Chicago University Press.

Derrida, J. (1992b). *Donner la mort*. Paris: Galilée.

Derrida, J. (1995). *The gift of death*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, J. (1996). Foi et Savoir: Les deuy source de la 'religion' aux limites de la simple raison. In: J. Derrida & G. Vattimo (Eds.), *La Religion*. Paris: Seuil/Faith and Knowledge.

Derrida, J. (1998). The two sources of 'religion' at the limits of reason alone. In J. Derrida & G. Vattimo (Eds.), *Religion: Cultural memory in the present* (pp. 1–78). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

de Montaigne, M. (1962). Essais, 2,12, In A. Thibaudet & M. Rat (Eds.), *Œuvres compètes* (p. 502). Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.

Gese, H. (1977). Die Sühne. In *Zur biblischen Theologie. Alttestamentliche Vorträge* (pp. 85–106). München.

Janowski, B. (2007). *Ecce Homo. Stellvertretung und Lebenshingabe als Themen Biblischer Theologie*. Neukirchen-Vluyn.

Jonas, H. (1979). *The imperative of responsibility: In search of ethics for the technological age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schiller, Fr. (1975). Philosophisch-Ästhetische Schriften, Theosophie des Julius. In *Sämtliche Werke,* Bd. 5 (pp. 344–358). München: Carl Hanser Verlag.

Starke, R. (1996). *The rise of Christianity: A sociologist reconsiders history*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Stanton, G. N. (2004). *Jesus and Gospel*. Cambridge.
Thoma, C., & Lauer, S. (1991). *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen II, Bereschit Rabba* (pp. 1–63). JudChr 13, Bern.